

AUGUST 8, 1966

CPYRGHT

Blunderball

The headline read BRICKBATS FOR FULBRIGHT, and an editorial in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat was a run-of-the-right-wing attack on Sen. J.W. Fulbright ("the crafty Arkansan") for demanding a place on the Congressional panel overseeing the supersecret CIA. The approving letter to the editor that appeared last week was equally routine—except for the signature. Would you believe . . . RICHARD HELMS, DIRECTOR, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, WASHINGTON, D.C.?

Incredibly enough, old pro Helms, 53, the first CIA director promoted from the ranks, had committed a blooper straight out of the Maxwell Smart set—and Fulbright's Senate colleagues promptly set out to get Helms. "Entirely out of place," snapped Minnesota's Eugene McCarthy, accusing Helms of meddling in domestic politics. Three members of the "Secret Seven"—the prestigious Senate panel that now watchdogs the CIA—seconded McCarthy, and so did laconic Majority Leader Mike Mansfield. "I am more than a little surprised that the silent service has seen fit to write to a paper expressing critical opinions about the Senate."

The tumult forced the man from CIA to cry "uncle." Sorry about that, he told the Senate (by phone to the Secret Seven's Leverett Saltonstall) and later he apologized to Fulbright himself: "I made a mistake and I sincerely regret it." Next day, over coffee at a closed session of Fulbright's Foreign Relations Committee, Helms gamely explained the gaffe. An underling, he said, had read the editorial, focusing not on the anti-Fulbright passages but on two flattering sentences about the CIA, and drafted a thank you for the boss to sign. He abstractedly signed it without recognizing its significance.

Helms's candor disarmed his critics—and he further cheered Fulbright by denying that the CIA had ever used the Peace Corps or student-exchange programs as cover for its agents. With that, Helms went back to his post wearing the chastened smile of a spy who had come in from the heat.